

Dictionary by Elfpen

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-08 14:19:34

Updated: 2017-11-24 11:38:41

Packaged: 2019-12-17 05:01:15

Rating: T

Chapters: 3

Words: 11,338

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The Gate is closed and Hawkins, Indiana is learning to make itself normal again. The Hoppers are taking each day - and each new word - one at a time. Rated for language.

1. Stuck

A/N: They put a parent/child adoptive relationship into this show, so that means I can't *not* write something for it.

He knew they'd have to lie low. Hell, after all that had happened, how could they afford not to? He'd told her they'd keep to their rules and take it slow, and she'd been so exhausted, she'd agreed to it. With the Gate closed just a month ago - and what a month - and the DoE descending, she hadn't wanted to leave the house, opting for sleep and TV most days.

But a *year*?

Light and muffled sounds of the TV filtered through the front windows, still boarded up from their big fight. "A year," he tested the words out on the freezing night air, his breath hanging in the moonlight before drifting away, as unimpressed as she was sure to be. "A year," he said again, trying to sound more casual this time. Like they'd done this already, like it hadn't ended in tears and shattered windows and punk makeup. "Just to be safe, you know." He sighed. "No, no.. just one year, to be on the safe side... shit, no."

Maybe if he shrugged while he said it, it would be easier? "A year," he waggled his shoulders at an imaginary audience. "Just a year, to keep you safe. Three hundred and sixty five days."

She hadn't even lasted that long before running away. He sighed again and hung his head. "Christ," he paused at the bottom of the stairs and gripped the bridge of his nose. The motion crinkled something in his chest pocket - an envelope, folded in two. He pulled it out and smoothed the creases against his leg.

Three hundred and sixty *four* days, really. Would one day - one night - really give him enough currency for this buyout? Or would he be handing out Eggo bribes until Halloween? He really should've gone to the store and picked some up before he came home. He glanced back at his truck.

Bradley's was open until 8. He had enough in his pocket for a box of Eggos and some smokes.

He considered it. *God*, it was tempting.

But he'd already signaled. Six three zero, just like he'd promised. Promised with those big brown eyes staring through his soul, curls soft and unkempt, hand petite under his and entirely capable of throwing him across the house if he made himself a liar.

He tapped the envelope against his knee until he'd found the resolve to jog up the steps. He gave his special knock and she undid all four locks in an instant. She must not've moved to do it, because when he stepped inside, she was planted on the couch with her sweater - one of his old ones, actually - pulled over her knees, bare toes curled at the hem. Not tearing her eyes away from the screen, she wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"Heya, kiddo," he kicked the door closed and hung up his coat. He tousled her hair, which made her smile, and then pulled her arm closer to look at her bloodstained sleeve. "What we'd talk about, huh?" he tugged on the cuff. "No blood on sleeves."

"It will wash out," she insisted.

Had she just spoken in a complete sentence? His heart swelled with pride, but then he realized she'd rolled her eyes at him and the chip on his shoulder returned. "Yeah, if I scrub at it all day," truth be told, he'd never tried to scrub out the bloodstains she left on her shirts. But if she was going to live a normal life... he made a mental note to ask Joyce which soaps worked best. "Which I'm not gonna do. No blood on sleeves."

He went to the kitchen and cracked open a beer, drinking it quickly and hoping it'd give him courage. "Hey, turn that off a minute, would you? I have something for you."

She didn't turn the TV off, but she did look at him, unabashed hope shining in her face. "Eggos?" she asked. He grunted a laugh.

"Not exactly, no. Now turn that off and come here a minute."

Hesitantly, she shut off the set and shuffled over to her chair at the table. He pulled out the envelope and waved it.

"I saw Doc Owens today."

"Bad man," she said.

But who wasn't, these days? "I don't think he's that bad," he said. "It's... complicated."

"Com-complicated?"

He sighed. Hadn't he already given her a new word today? Surely with all the TV she watched, she should've learned more words by now. "We'll look that one up after this, alright?"

She nodded solemnly, and he knew that the dictionary would be their bedtime story again. Hopefully he wouldn't fall asleep before she did.

"Anyway, he uh... he gave me this." He handed the envelope to her. "A gift. Kinda... making up for some of the bad stuff he's done."

As soon as the envelope was out of his hands, he felt inexplicably nervous. He fidgeted. "I know you didn't really have a say in it, and I'm really sorry about that. I didn't know he was going to do it either." He laughed. "Frankly, I didn't know he had it I him."

She'd pulled the paper from the envelope. "Birth..." she knew that word. "Cer...certificate?"

"*Certificate*, a document to certify something. In this case, that someone was born."

She read on. "Jane Hopper." She paused, and he held his breath. "Who is Jane Hopper?"

He chuckled. "You are, kid."

She frowned at him. "Jane," she pointed to herself. She then pointed to him, finger hovering over his chest. "Hopper."

"Hopper is my family name. Like how Mike is Mike Wheeler, Nancy is

Nancy Wheeler. I'm Jim Hopper." She was frowning intensely, working to understand. She looked back down at the birth certificate.

Child of: Teresa Ives...

"Mama," she pointed at the name.

...and James Hopper.

She pointed, and frowned at it. She looked up at him. "Papa?"

"No," he rubbed a hand over his face, hoping she'd never, ever call him that. "No, your dad never had one of these made, when you were born. He didn't want anyone knowing about you." He tapped the paper where his seldom-seen legal name fell beside her mother's. "That's me. Doc Owens had it made up this way so you can..." he found himself choking on a lump. "So you can legally be my daughter. So you can lead a normal life." He watched her face as the revelation spread.

"You," she pointed, hesitantly approaching understanding. "My... father?"

"Legally, yes."

"Family?" Her eyes were wide. He made sure his didn't waver.

"Yes."

"No papa?" she whispered, as if afraid to wish for it any louder. He leaned over the table, planting one hand firmly on the table beside hers.

"Never again."

She stared at the paper, eyes wide in wonder.

"You got me now. And sorry kid, but," he flicked the paper, "you're kinda stuck with me."

"Stuck?"

So many new words today. "Stuck. Like you can't get rid of something, and it can't leave you."

She looked up at him. Birth certificate still in hand, she got from her seat and ran around the table to hug his neck. It was the first time she'd ever initiated contact, and for a moment he was frozen in place. Hesitantly, he turned in his chair so he could hug her back. He looked over her shoulder at the cabin, with its boarded up windows, his creaky sofa, his freezer full of junk food, and wondered what kind of life he could possibly give her.

"You can still see your mom, you know. And your aunt Becky."

"Home," she said, muffled against his shirt.

Was she talking about Hawkins? Or the cabin? Or was she remembering the Ives'? She pulled away and looked up at him, and damn, just seeing those big brown eyes welling with tears nearly made him cry. "Stuck with me," she poked him hard in the chest. "Stuck." She poked.

He caught her hand before she could poke him a third time. "Yeah, kid, we're stuck with each other for good, now."

"Stuck means no leaving."

"That's right."

She stared him down, refusing to let the tears fall. "Promise?" She asked.

He stared back just as hard and pressed her hand to his chest again. "I promise."

Her smile could've lit up a black hole.

A year could wait for tomorrow. For now, they were stuck, and they were happy.

2. Old Man

A year, he'd told her. *That* had gone over well.

"I mean, there aren't any windows left to smash, so that helped." Hopper took a drag and sighed, smoke clouding the alleyway behind Melvald's. He flicked the ashes away and caught Joyce's look. "And yes, I know I need to get them fixed before the snow gets bad." He passed her the cigarette.

"I can take her for a day if you need to have someone over there."

"No, it's too risky. I'll do it myself."

"Hop..."

"With all these feds crawling around? I don't think so." He'd seen five just on his way to the station, for Christ's sake.

"I just don't want you to freeze to death."

"We'll be fine. I know a guy. I'll get some windows and fix it up soon."

"You'd better." She passed the cigarette back to him. He took a long puff, watching their breath billow out, smoke indistinguishable from icy fog. He passed it back to her.

"D'you sell toasters here?"

The non-sequitur took her aback. "Yeah, why?"

"Our's is broken." He could feel her eyes on him. "El chucked it at me and missed; smashed on the wall."

"Oh, Hop," Joyce was looking up at him with helpless sympathy.

"Eh, it's alright," he waved a hand. "Can't say I blame her. She apologized right away, too. That's new." He let out a humorless laugh. "Didn't make me feel any better." He tossed the used butt into the snow and mashed it with his boot. "God, I feel like such an ass. Coop her up for nearly a year, apologize, turn around, do it again?"

He leaned back against the brick wall. "I'm as bad as those lab jockeys who raised her."

"That is not true," Joyce snapped at him.

"Isn't it? Something's gotta change. I dunno what, but something's gotta be different this time."

Joyce wouldn't deny it. But what could she do? "You did tell her she can go to the Snow Ball, though. That's something, right?"

He was silent.

"You did tell her, didn't you?"

He sighed and scratched his neck.

"Hop," she smacked him. "You know how much that would mean to her."

"I know, I know. She'll go. She will. I just need to figure out a few things before I make a promise - you know how she is about those."

"Figure things out? What things?"

"Like how long these energy folks will be here, and who will see her, and..." he fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable. He glanced at Joyce, and away, and back. "What do thirteen-year-old girls even *wear* to dances these days?"

Joyce laughed.

"I'm sorry, *how much*?" Hopper had the Byers' phone propped up on one ear, the other wielding a folded Sears catalog like a weapon. "No, no, I'm sorry, you don't seem to understand. I want one, not one hundred." Joyce was leaned against the wall, watching him and making frantic but indecipherable eyebrow signals at him. "What do you mean that is the price for *one*?" He sighed. "Okay, fine. Fine. What about the, uh..." he looked at the catalog and frowned. Immediately, Joyce came over and pointed at the one she'd dubbed a "close second". "Uhh... Same line, number 3? Yeah. Sure." A pause.

He nearly dropped the catalog. "What? But it says right here that it's only..." Joyce was wincing, back at it with the eyebrow signals. "Why the hell is that extra? Do you make the damn thing out of gold, or what?" A pause. He rubbed his brow. "No. No, you know what? Forget it." He slammed the phone back on the receiver.

"How much did they want for it?" she asked.

"Too much for my salary. Extortion." He tossed the catalog across the hall to land on a chair.

"It's Sears, Hop. You're not going to get much cheaper than that."

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. Between repairs for the house, repairs for his truck, a new cord for the TV, food for two people, and *so many* Eggos, he hadn't thought to leave room in his budget for a dress. "I guess chucks and men's flannel aren't really date night material?"

When he looked up, Joyce's arms were crossed, her lips pursed. She was eyeing her mom's old sewing table with a look that made Hopper nervous. "There is *one* thing we could do."

He was the only male in the entire store, which was unsettling in and of itself. The fact that the store smelled almost exactly like his grandmother's house did not help. He fought the urge to keep his hands behind his back so as not to touch -or break - anything, regardless that the store was essentially one giant pincushion.

"Here, these are on clearance," Joyce tugged his arm, and he followed her through a jungle of fabric. There were velvets and fleeces and beautiful satins, colors of every shade, some with prints or glitter or tassels. He judged every one by what Jane might think of them; most of them, she'd probably call *pretty*.

When they emerged from this aisle of wonder, they found themselves standing in front of a very small, mostly empty rack where all the ugliest, most dated fabrics congregated. Some had stains on them. Others appeared to be stains on the world at large. Joyce saw their prospects and fidgeted, fighting to maintain optimism.

"See anything you like?"

Hopper's brain stalled. "Uhhh..." there weren't many to choose from. But then again, there were still too many. "Shit, I don't know, Joyce. This is why I called Sears."

"Oh, come on." She began digging through the bolts like a woman on a mission. "We'll find something." Sighing, he joined in.

He considered a tasteful navy print before he realized it was almost completely see-through. A shaggy orange mess fell on him as he moved a stack of upholstery fabric to the side. "This would be a lot easier if she were here to pick."

"Well," Joyce hauled fabric into stacks and sorted through them methodically. "If you don't want her out in the open," she looked over her shoulder, but the old ladies in the yarn aisle weren't paying attention, "you have to pick for her. It'll be a surprise. A gift," clearly the idea excited Joyce.

"Do dads do that kind of thing?"

"The good ones do," she smiled at him. They continued browsing.

"What about this one?"

Joyce looked at it for less than a second. "No."

"Okay."

As they continued to dig, he realized she was smiling, but not about the fabrics. "So you're *dad* now, huh?"

He chuckled. "Got my name on her birth certificate and everything," he said. She turned to him in surprise.

"What?"

"Ol' Doc Owens. Guy had a change of heart after the whole... demon dog thing."

"Demedog," Joyce corrected.

"Whatever. It's all official, on paper, yada yada." He picked up a plaid knit and almost asked Joyce for her thoughts before he saw the price. He set it carefully to the side. "She's stuck with me, poor kid."

Joyce watched him, running his hands over a floral pink calico print before passing it over for a punkish, embossed pleather. She fought back a smile. "She's a lucky girl, Hop,"

Hopper shook his head and sighed. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"No one ever does."

"I did before. With Sara." Joyce froze for a moment, but tried to keep moving normally. She'd only heard him talk about Sara a few times since she died. "Read the whole book on parenting. Four or five of 'em, actually. Diapers and toys and development and shit. But..." he looked around them. No one in hearing distance, and the fabric ate up most of their words, anyway. "Smashed windows? Toasters? Jesus, you should've seen her at the Gate, Joyce, I..." he found himself speechless. "And I'm supposed to what, read her a bedtime story and tuck her in every night? What happens when she realizes she doesn't want me around? I can't stop her. What will happen to her?"

"Doesn't want you..." Joyce scoffed. "Hop." She fixed him with a admonishing stare. "You've met her parents. You've seen where she was raised. You're the best thing that's ever happened to her - wait, what's that?"

"What?" Hopper looked up.

"That, in your hands."

He looked down at the bolt he'd been moving out of the way. It was a plain, flat blue with small red polka-dots. "This?"

"It's nice, let me see," Joyce leaned over the rack to take it from him, unfolding a layer to look at the width, the weave. Hopper watched her, shrugging.

"I mean, I guess it's okay. Kinda boring, don't you think?"

She picked at the price tag. "It's \$3.25 a yard."

Hopper blinked. "Is that... good?"

"It's 50% off." His face cleared.

"It's beautiful. She'll love it."

Joyce grinned. "Come on," she tucked the bolt under her arm and led him through aisles of paper and ribbon and patterns. "I've always wanted to make something for a girl."

Hopper drove her back to the store and helped her load the bags of fabric and ribbon into her car.

"What do you mean you don't know what size she is? What has she been wearing all this time?"

Hopper shrugged. "Whatever I could find in the bag deals at goodwill. Gotta pair of chucks from the Wheeler kid last year. My shirts if she gets cold. Some coat she stole from a hunter." He shut the trunk and found Joyce staring at him in horror.

"A coat she *stole*?"

"What?" He spread his arms. "It's not like I can just waltz down to the department store and buy a bunch of girl's clothes. I don't know what size she is. Too skinny is all I know. Won't eat her damn vegetables."

"Fine, fine," Joyce closed her eyes and shook her head. *Men*. "I'll just... guess." She pulled out her Malvern's smock and pulled it on. "We'll make it work."

"I'm sorry, Joyce. I really owe you one." She nodded at him.

"Get those windows fixed, alright?"

"Alright. If you need any help with the dress or... sewing or whatever, just let me know."

"I'll call you when it's done."

"But if you-"

"When it's done, Hop," she insisted, the image of James Hopper trying to operate a sewing machine quirking her mouth into a smile. "Now come on, I'll show you to the toasters."

There weren't many to choose from. Two brands, and they looked suspiciously similar.

"This one's two bucks cheaper, but we've also had two returned in the past week, so I don't know, I might go for this one," she pointed between the toasters and shrugged. Hopper studied the boxes and looked beyond them.

"What about this?" he pointed to the appliance next on the shelf.

"I thought you needed a toaster."

"This'll do."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. You sell Bisquick?"

"Jane?" Hopper kicked open the door, navigating two heavy grocery bags through the door. "I got dinner." Nothing. The promise of food usually worked. "Jane?" He looked around the house, and spotted the freshly-repaired TV cord drawn into her room. He dumped the groceries on the table and went to her door.

"Hey, kid," tapped on the door frame. "You didn't signal back. You alright?"

The door swung open, ostensibly of its own accord, revealing her bundled on her bed, wearing a blanket like a hood, watching whatever second rate programming the network was playing that evening.

"Cold." She said. Her nose was red, but so were her eyes. Had she been crying? A laugh track emanated from the TV, and the knife of guilt that had been stuck in his gut all day twisted. He glanced at the

drafty window by her bed.

"Yeah, I'm gonna take care of that window soon. Come on out, we'll build a fire."

Well practiced in the routines of the cabin, Jane started the fire quickly and went immediately for the pile of food on the counter. "Biz...quick?" She read. He glanced at her from where he was stacking TV dinners in the freezer.

"Bis-quick. It's a mix to make pancakes. Or waffles."

"Waffles?"

His face twitched in what wanted to be a smile. "Yeah, waffles. They're a breakfast food. Open up the box, we'll make some."

She glanced at the darkened windows, listening to the crickets. "Breakfast food."

"Not today. Today it's dinner." He moved around her to get a mixing bowl. "Come on, you'll like them. You know what they are."

"I... know what they are?" She sounded skeptical.

"Sure do." He set the bowl on the counter and pulled out the last item in the bag, a large box, which he unpacked in front of her. She watched in fascination, transfixed by the shiny chrome exterior. He opened it. "Now," he pointed at the iron's surface. "What does this look like to you?"

She peered into it, and frowned. She held out her hands over it in a circle, trying to envision the pattern imposed on a much smaller surface. Realization dawned. "Eggos?" She asked, daring to hope.

"Yeah, but these are *better*."

She'd lately mastered the squinted look indigenous to teenagers that arrived somewhere between skepticism and personal insult, and she gave it to Hopper now. "Better?" she accused.

He ignored the bile and smiled. "Grab the milk. They're pretty easy to

make." It was probably a bad idea showing her *how* easy they were, but after the shit he'd put her through, he figured she could make as many waffles as she wanted.

It had actually been more expensive than either of the toasters, but the look on her face when the first batch came off the iron was worth every penny. Hot and steaming and so much *better* than Eggos, he piled them into a stack and doused them with butter and syrup. She took one bite and her eyes flew wide. She looked at the waffles, and then at Hopper, who laughed. She then proceed to shove an entire waffle in her mouth.

"Woah, hey, slow down there," He reached out, but what was he going to do? " Small bites, you'll choke." He set his own plate down across from her and dug in with more tempered enthusiasm. He glanced up at her. A golden corner was hanging out of her mouth and a dribble of syrup had tracked its way down her chin.

"Pretty good, huh?" He asked. She nodded her head vigorously, curls bouncing. It made him smile. She'd tried to maintain her dark, punkish new style as best she could with the wardrobe she had, but he was glad that she'd been letting her hair curl naturally. "Thought so."

She tried to say something around her food, but he couldn't understand her. Eventually she swallowed and actually took a moment to breathe before she inhaled another slice. "Waffles should be for *every* meal. Not breakfast."

"I mean, waffles can be for whatever meal you want, really," he said. "Breakfast, dinner, lunch, I guess." He caught sight of the wild look in her eye. "But *not all in one day*," he amended. She sagged. "One meal a day. *One*."

She scowled, but said nothing as she poured more syrup on the second half of her stack.

They ate in silence. Watching her devour her food, it was like she hadn't eaten in a week, hadn't ever had real food in her life. Hopper remembered suddenly the days when he'd stockpiled Eggos in his old freezer and wrapped them in twos and threes to leave in the drop box

in the woods.

He remembered seeing her for the first time last winter. Dirty, skinny, wild. He remembered the first night he'd set her up in her own room, how she had smiled to have her own space, her own bed, her own toys. He remembered the face she'd made when he'd made her eat peas for the first time. Remembered the wonder in her eyes when he started reading her bedtime stories.

He remembered the look on her face the first time he'd come home late, and she realized he could lie.

But that was par for the course, these days. She mopped up syrup from her plate with the last bite of her waffle.

"Listen, kid," he set his fork aside and leaned on one arm. She looked up at him. He rubbed his forehead. "I'm... I'm really sorry about... today. And. Well, about everything." He sighed. "I don't want to keep you cooped up here. You gotta know that. But... these guys in Hawkins right now, they're looking for you. They could take you away, and do who the hell knows what, and..." he had to stop and take a breath. He couldn't look at her. "And I just... I don't want to lose you."

"Black hole." She said.

"Yeah," he agreed, running a hand over his face. "Yeah, the black hole."

"You're not a black hole." She reached out and took his hand. He looked at it, and gripped it back.

"Maybe not. But they are." He finally made eye contact with her. "I just want to keep you safe."

"I'll stay safe," she said, sounding far more resigned than she had this morning. "One year. Three hundred and sixty-five." Was this really the kid who'd screamed at him and shattered all his windows? He was so proud of how much she'd grown, but he still felt so, so guilty. He remembered Joyce and smiled.

"Well... one year, take away one night, what does that give you?"

"One night?" She frowned.

"Three hundred and sixty four days, that's what."

"Why take away one?" He reached over his chair to dig around in his jacket.

"Because..." he unfolded the flyer, a little crumpled by now, and placed it in front of her.

The top half of the page was dominated by bubble blue letters that read: *Hawkins Middle Snow Ball 1984*. Her eyes went wide.

"A little bird told me you might want to go. And by little bird, I mean Mike." She looked up at him. "He's been pestering me about it for two weeks. Wants you to be his date, I think," he managed to say it with some distaste, like any self-respecting father of a teenage daughter would. Still, truth be told, seeing her blush over that gangly Wheeler kid was pretty... well, pretty cute. "I'd been planning on telling you you should go, but with all these Energy folks around, and then Owens said we ought to lie low, but..." he shrugged. "I think we can risk one night."

"Risks are stupid," she said. "We're not stupid."

He laughed. "No, but we're not black holes, either." He smiled at her. "Right?"

She smiled back. "Right."

"Now come on." He stood up. "If you're going to go to a dance, you oughta know how to dance." She watched with trepidation as he dusted off the record player and put on one of his weird old favorites.

"Oh, yeah, here we go," he smiled, bobbing his head and snapping his fingers. He started moving to the beat and gave her a smile. She grimaced just to see him, but found that she couldn't look away.

"This is probably too cool for a middle school dance these days," he said, affecting what he thought was a hip vibe. "Come on, I'll show you some moves." To demonstrate, he shuffled himself toward her, ungracefully swinging his hips as he did so.

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Heknewhe was embarrassing her. "Come on," he took her hand and pulled her into the living room with him, pushing the coffee table out of the way. "I bet Mike doesn't know any of these," holding both her hands in his, he moved into a clumsy version of the twist.

"You don't know any of these."

"You won't either with that attitude," he shimmied up closer to her and grabbed her around the waist. "Come on, it'll be fun." Then, he started *singing* to the music.

"Stop," She groaned, pulling away even as she smiled.

"You're going to a da-ance," he said in tune with the song, "you gotta know how to da-ance, girl."

"Stop!" she laughed even harder, and he laughed with her, still twisting away.

Joyce finished the dress the day before the Snow Ball, and had rushed over after work with a needle and thread, in a frenzy to get it fitted and fixed up in time for the dance.

As soon as she put the dress on, Jane had darted to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Joyce and Hopper watched from the living room.

"It's... a little big," Joyce said, obviously disappointed in herself but trying to hide it. She studied the way the dress hung off of Jane's shoulders, the belt that was a bit too loose and falling to one side. "The hem isn't even." She sighed and rubbed her cheek. "Oh, those sleeves could've been so much better if my damn machine wasn't so old."

"Joyce," Hopper whispered. "Look at her face."

Jane was staring at her reflection like she'd never seen it before, wonder and admiration shining from every pore. She touched the bargain-bought fabric and second-hand belt as if they were made from silk. "Pretty," she said.

"You did good, Byers," Hopper elbowed her gently, and Joyce grinned. She went to stand behind Jane, who saw her in the mirror and turned around, beaming.

"You like it?" Joyce grinned back, Jane nodded excitedly. Joyce gave the girl's shoulders a squeeze through the puffed sleeves. "Good. Ow, you look so grown up. Let's just tighten this a bit," she fiddled with the belt until it would at least *look* like it was made to fit. "There, that's better. What d'you think, Hop?" She cast a look over her shoulder.

"Beautiful. Helluva lot prettier than Mike will be, I bet."

"Ignore him," Joyce scoffed to Jane. "Oh," she paused, suddenly remembering. "I have something else for you. A little gift, girl to girl." She winked, and went over to the bag she'd left by the door. "Now, when *I* was thirteen, my older sister gave me one of these, even though my mom didn't want her to." She pulled out a small fabric bag and unzipped it, revealing an assortment of lip glosses, blushes, and compacts. Jane peered inside and picked through the contents. She was reminded of the day when Mike had rummaged through his sister's things to dress her up like a 'real' girl. But these things were *hers*, and they were *real*.

"Makeup?"

"I'll show you how to put it all on. It's like painting, but on your *face*," the way Joyce said it made Jane smile. "Come on, let's go look in the mirror, I'll show you."

When the two women emerged from the bathroom, faces fresh and pink, lips shiny and eyes sparkling, Hopper was sitting at the table alternating between a cup of coffee and a cigarette. He looked up and smiled. "Look at you two, I hardly recognized you." He stood and went over to them, glancing between them, eyes lingering on Jane. "Didn't she tell you she goes for punk makeup now, Joyce?" he teased, and Jane laughed. "You look good, kid." She looked down at her dress and twirled absently. It made his heart swell. "So, what do you think?"

He could tell from her face that she was over the moon. She looked

up at him, hair curled and pinned as carefully as her makeup and dress. "Bitchin."

The following evening, she managed to do her own hair and make-up nearly as well as Joyce had. She looked similarly 'bitchin' as she had yesterday; only now she was much, much more nervous.

"You almost ready? We need to leave soon." He glanced at Jane, but she didn't budge. She stood by the TV set, staring at nothing. "You okay?"

Lost in thought, she didn't respond. She ran her hands over her dress to make sure nothing had come undone, over her belt, her hair.

"Hey, hey," Hopper sat on the couch beside her, so they were more or less on the same level. "You look fine. Stop fussing."

Jane looked at him, and then back at the small dress repair kit Joyce had left behind 'just in case'. She'd left the dress pattern behind, Hopper didn't know why. On the front of the packet were three women, one modeling the dress that Jane now wore. The woman in the picture sported a long, shining necklace. Jane touched it, almost wistfully, and then touched the bare space beneath her own collarbone.

It was so easy to forget that, beneath the telekinesis and earth-shattering power and the fact that the government had built her as a weapon for heaven only knew what, the little girl he'd once called Eleven was still just that: a girl, not so little any more, who'd been deprived all her life of the simplest pleasures. Pretty things. Freedom. She couldn't have it all, not yet. But she wasn't Eleven anymore. She was Jane Hopper. And Jim Hopper would damn well give her as much as he could.

"Hey, uh, I know this has all been a little slapdash. Next time, I'll take you down to the store and we can pick out something nice together, alright?"

"Next time?" she asked with hope.

"Yeah, next time." He glanced at the pattern, where her hand still rested. "Get you a nice pretty necklace, or a bracelet, or something." His thoughts trailed off. "Sara always loved bracelets the most. The more colorful beads the better. And she *loved* to do her hair. Woulda loved your curls." He flicked the lock of hair she'd pulled out over her forehead. She smiled. He glanced down at his wrist, where'd he'd kept the blue hair tie since the day they'd shaved his daughter's head. He hadn't taken it off, not once.

With hesitation, he pulled it off his wrist and held it up. "This was hers. Blue was her favorite color. I want you to have it."

Her expression changed in an instant. She had never known Sara. She barely even understood what a loving family was. But she'd seen it, and she knew how much this meant to him. To her. "It's yours," she said quietly, unsure. "Sara is your girl."

"Yeah, well, it's yours now, alright? If Sara coulda met you, she would've wanted you to have it." He took her hand and gently threaded it through the hairband. After years of wear, it was stretched out and worn, and hung on her wrist like a ribbon. He gave her hand a squeeze. "You're my girl, too."

Her chin twitched and her mouth twisted up, and he could tell she was about to cry. He wanted anything but that, so he smiled and teased, "And I guess now I'm your old man."

As intended, she forgot her tears and frowned instead. "Old... old man?" He wasn't *that* old. Her Papa had been white-haired. Hopper's hair was still sandy brown.

"Yup. Old and lame, with horrible dance moves." She smiled at that. He looked down at his bare wrist, and glanced at hers, where she rubbed the hair tie bracelet absently. He nodded to himself and stood. "Ready?"

She nodded. "Ready."

"Let's go."

Once they arrived, he drove a full lap of the school's perimeter to

make sure there weren't any feds lurking in the shadows.

"Alright, if you see any bad men, or women, or whatever, you come right out to the truck, okay?"

"Okay," she was pressed up against the window, watching all the middle schoolers file up into lines, dresses and suits and fancy hair.

"And if you need me for any reason, you just get one of the boys' radios, go on channel 11, and signal me."

"Okay." There were so many people she didn't recognize. Where was Dustin? Lucas? Will? *Mike*?

"Good." He parked the car. "I'll be out here the whole time."

"Okay."

"Stay in the stadium. Don't wander around, I think they still have this place under surveillance."

"Okay."

"If you want to leave early, you just let me know."

"Okay."

He looked at her, all wide-eyed and excited, and felt guilty for reading her the riot act. "Hey, El,"

She looked at him.

"Have fun, alright?"

She smiled and nodded, and got out of the car. He watched her go, looking more like a lady than a teenager. To himself and his truck he said, "but not too much fun."

She disappeared, so he grabbed a smoke and went to find Joyce. He knew he wouldn't be the only over-worried parent hanging around in the back.

He did not realize it then, but it was the first time he'd actually

thought of himself as a parent since the day that Sara died. It would not be the last.

3. Stunning

Christmas had come to Hawkins.

There were great big bows on the street lamps and candles in every window, lights twisted around all the trees in the rich side of town. Tree farms had replaced pumpkin patches, carefully curated rows of firs demarcated by strings of lights. Bradley's played carols and Malvern's sold lights, there were toy displays in storefront windows, and Santa rang a bell for charity outside of St. James' on Main Street.

It was a goddamn nuisance.

Hopper had lost his subscription to the Christmas spirit years ago, sometime before he'd left Chicago and after he'd lost Sara. He hadn't really thought of Christmas since moving to Hawkins, except for the Monday after Thanksgiving every year when Flo put up the tinsel he'd be cleaning off his hat for three months.

It wasn't that Hopper hated Christmas; he saw nothing inherently wrong with it. But Christmas, like most holidays, was something that did not apply to him. It was about family, and giving, and loving. Hopper had no family, so while he did give himself a six pack and an extra pack of cigarettes and loved falling into an early night, Christmas as a phenomenon was nothing special. Even last year, after the earth-shattering chaos of the Upside Down, Christmas, to Jim Hopper, had been just one more snowy day in December.

This year, however, was different.

"I want a Christmas tree."

Hopper jumped and nearly nailed his thumb to the wall. "Jesus, kid," he glanced down at Jane from his spot on the stepladder. "Don't sneak up on me like that." He drove the nail into the wall and picked up another. Jane stood by, watching expectantly. He drove in another nail, and another halfway, and then stopped. His brain caught up. He turned to her. "Did you say you want a Christmas tree?"

She nodded her head.

He blinked. "What, in here?"

She nodded her head.

He was nonplussed. Jane told him that she wanted things fairly often, but about half of the time, it was Eggos. The other half of the time, it was non-Eggo food items, drinks, heat, blankets, clean clothes, or, if she was in a good mood, a story. *Christmas trees* did not factor into it.

"Why?" He found himself asking.

"It's December," she explained. "Christmas."

Hopper didn't know what to say. He hadn't had a Christmas tree in ages - Christ, how long had it been? It certainly hadn't been in this house. Or his last. Sara had always loved the tree... and everything that went under it. Shit, Jane had seen a Christmas tree on TV, hadn't she? Had she seen the presents? Stockings? A Norman Rockwell-worthy Christmas dinner? Christmas trees were harbingers of other Christmas things, things that would be much harder to hold in a promise, and promises were not taken lightly in the Hopper household.

Jim squared his jaw. Better to keep her from disappointment early on.

"It's a fire hazard," he told her, and turned back to his task.

"It wouldn't be near the fire," she insisted. "It would be over there," she pointed to the spot by the door, by the record player. "Safe."

He gave an exasperated sigh. "You've thought this through." Of course she had.

She nodded.

He sighed again, dollar signs dancing before his eyes. "Even if we did get a tree. And even if we did set it up there," He pointed halfheartedly with his hammer. "What would you put on it, huh?"

This time, she looked more uncertain. "Pretty things," She decided.

"Yeah? And where you gonna get pretty things?" He turned back to his task and began hammering.

Jane fidgeted uncertainly. Amid the noise of the hammer and nail, she thought. Eventually, she said, "Outside. The store." Hopper threaded his hammer through a belt loop and surveyed his handiwork.

"You mean *I'll* get them from outside and the store." He marched down the stepladder and put it aside. He opened the new window and gave the sill an experimental shake.

"It will be pretty," she insisted. "Happy. For Christmas."

He hadn't meant to slam the window shut as hard as he did. She jumped, stepping away. "Listen, kid," He turned to her and opened his mouth, ready to list all the reasons they couldn't have a big Christmas, how expensive all these new windows had been, how he'd have to work on Christmas day anyway, how he had no clue what gift she would like except Eggos.

But then he saw her face. Thirteen years old, it reminded him, and never had a real Christmas. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"How about... I rustle up some lights, grab a small tree from the forest, and you can decorate it with some stuff we have around here, alright?" Jane bit her lip and he could tell she wasn't pleased. "How's that sound?"

"Will you pick a pretty tree?"

"Course." He wasn't sure he was qualified to classify a *pretty* tree.

"A tall one?"

"Not too tall," He said. "I have to carry it home, ya know."

She smiled a teeny bit at that, even though she tried not to. She studied the floorboards for a moment, deflated but not upset. At length, she shrugged and looked back up. "Halfway happy?"

"Yeah," he picked up the stepladder and moved to the next window, next to where Jane stood. "Halfway happy." He ruffled her hair as he climbed up, and she smiled. She scurried off to her room to find whatever pretty things the cabin had to offer. Hopper only shook his head and went back to work.

It wasn't the strangest favor he'd asked of her, but he was still embarrassed. Then again, they'd been captured together and signed nine hundred pages of NDAs and voluntarily travelled through actual hell to rescue her son from another dimension, so he figured he could ask for this one stupid thing and she would understand, one broke single parent to another.

He had to knock on the door a few times before anyone answered.

"Oh, hey chief," Jonathan flashed him a smile, but almost immediately it faltered, his ever-haunted eyes glancing behind Jim to his blazer. "Is everything okay?" After the last few months, Hopper couldn't blame him for wondering.

"Believe it or not, this is a personal call. Your mom home?"

"Uh, yeah, she's-"

"Who is it?" Shouted Joyce. Her short, quick footsteps sounded in the hall. "Either go outside or let them in, just shut the door, it's freezing-" Joyce, still in her Malvern's smock, stopped short.

"Hop? What are you doing here? Come inside, you're letting in the cold." She waved him in and he could only comply. She went back to the kitchen while he took off his hat.

"You should have told me you were coming, Hop," she said above the noise of the oven door. "I'd've set another place at the table."

He glanced into the dining room where Nancy Wheeler sat, looking a little uncomfortable, by the window. Will was beside her, scribbling away with crayons at a decent rendering of a knight and a wizard. Hopper could smell food, and realized how hungry he was.

"I'm sorry for interrupting, I didn't realize..."

Joyce re-emerged from the kitchen, bearing a steaming meatloaf to the table. She set it down and turned back to the kitchen.

"Because you don't have a phone, you dinosaur," she teased. Jonathan hid a smile - Will didn't bother hiding his. Hopper ignored them.

"They bugged my house once, they could do it again," he told her, as he'd told her several times already. "Phones are a risk."

"Uh huh," Joyce stirred a bowl of steaming corn and balanced it on one hand so she could grab a bowl of sugar snaps peas. "And the Hoppers don't take risks," she parroted.

He frowned. "Where'd you hear that?"

"El- sorry, *Jane* told me."

Without asking or having to be asked, Hopper took the bowl of peas from her so she wouldn't drop them. "She told you? When?"

"When I was helping her with her makeup. Call it girl talk."

"How is El?" Asked Nancy when the two adults emerged into the dining room.

"Oh, you know," Hopper shrugged. To be completely frank, even after a year living with the kid he felt no more qualified to read her moods than anyone else. "Quiet. Little moody. Loves waffles and soap operas."

Nancy laughed, and Joyce scoffed. "You're still letting her watch those?"

"What should I let her watch? Drying paint?"

"What's a soap opera?" Will asked. Joyce waved him off. Hopper set the peas out on the table.

"Now she wants a Christmas tree."

"Aww," Nancy smiled.

"That's so sweet, Hop," Joyce was smiling, too. Hopper was not.

"Yeah? Well, I got no shortage of trees, but..." he looked around at the kids. Nancy Wheeler probably had no clue what it was like to pinch pennies, but he knew Jonathan understood what it was like being poor. Even Will did. But Jim was a grown-up. The damn Chief of Police. Revealing his financial problems in front of a bunch of teenagers didn't sit well, no matter who they were.

"Joyce, can I talk to you a minute? Alone?"

Confused, Joyce frowned, and glanced at the food on the table. "Sure." She gestured to Nancy and the boys. "You go ahead and eat, we'll be back in a minute."

They stepped out on the back porch. Joyce huddled in her sweater. "Is something wrong, Hop? Is it about El? Is she okay?"

"No, no, nothing like that," he assured. Joyce's shoulders slumped in relief and he felt guilty. "I was just, uh, I was wondering..." God, why was he so embarrassed about this? Dragging her out here in the cold for the sake of his own pride. What an asshole. "D'you still have all those Christmas lights?"

She was nonplussed. "Most of them." She frowned at him, as if almost afraid of what he would say. "Why?"

"Do you think I could, uh... borrow a few? Just for the holidays."

She stared at him. "Wait... for, what, for a tree?"

"Yeah."

"That's it?"

He realized how stupid he sounded, and sniffed, nose starting to run in the cold air. "Yup."

She laughed. "Hopper, you - you pull me aside and ask about some crap I kept from from... *back then*, you were scaring me." She caught the look on his face and added, "you don't have to be embarrassed."

He gave an exasperated shrug. "Don't I? Gone and gotten myself a daughter, can't even afford damn Christmas lights for her damn Christmas tree." He tapped his pocket, itching to smoke but knowing he shouldn't. "Kids are expensive."

"They are," Joyce concurred almost jokingly, as a veteran to a trainee. He suddenly remembered that she'd been working two jobs for years to support her family. He felt very small.

"I just... I never realized how much I spent on..." he gestured vaguely. *Cigarettes. Booze. Pain meds.* He closed his eyes and sighed. You never knew exactly how messed up you were until you had a kid to take care of. "...on shit, I guess. I need to go back on that diet."

Joyce smiled but said nothing. "How're the windows, Hop?"

"Good," he shrugged. They had been the biggest expense so far.

"They keeping you both warm?" And that was the point, after all.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"Good." Joyce patted his arm and stepped out toward the shed. "It's freezing, let's hurry up. What color of lights did you want?"

"What do you have?"

He brought back six strands. She took the big colorful ones, the ones that were very clearly designed to go out of doors, and put those on the indoor tree. Of course.

He put his foot down before she could suggest they put any outside, a plan which ultimately backfired. He was the one who'd brought home six strands. He was the one who'd said none of them could go outside. He really should've seen this coming.

He kept reminding himself that the bundle of nails between his lips was not a cigarette, but he sucked on them anyway and tried not to fall over. He put one more in the wall as far over as he could reach. There was still a good six feet of lights levitating along the ceiling, waiting for him to catch up.

"You gotta slow up, kid, not all of us can just float over there," he teased, climbing down the stepladder. He glanced down at Jane as he did, and above the bloody nose, her expression was one of epiphany. He stopped mid-descent. "That is *not* an invitation," he forestalled, and planted his boots firmly on terra firma. "No using your powers on people, especially not me." He liked to pretend this fit under the umbrella of ethics, and was in no way related to his own aversions toward flying.

She crossed her arms and looked away with a miffed expression. *Spoil sport*. Still, she said nothing as he tediously moved the stepladder and climbed back up to tack in another nail. She handed him more nails when he needed and held the lights just so. She could have done it faster by herself, but he didn't like her using her powers around things like nails, and the fact that he was taking the time to help made her feel... she wasn't very good at classifying emotions. It made her feel at home.

"Alright," he said, descending the ladder one last time, "that oughta do it. How's it look?"

Jane went to the center of the cabin and spun in a slow circle. Five strands of lights, some white, some multicolored, were pinned up along the edges of their small cabin and along the loft's edge like icing, twinkling and beautiful. Their small tree, standing only slightly crooked by the record player, practically shone with the over-sized bulbs. By the time Jane spun fully around to look at Hopper, she was grinning ear to ear. She always looked more like a kid when she smiled, and he couldn't help but smile back.

"Yeah?"

"Stunning," she said.

"New word. Where'd you learn that one?" She pointed at the TV. He really needed to get her some books. "I like it." He went for the door to put his tools back out in the shed. As he passed, he leaned down to kiss her on the forehead. "Merry Christmas, kid."

When he came back to the cabin, she was still spinning slowly, watching the lights.

The next day, it snowed. It wasn't great snow, either. It was soggy and icy and disgusting, and it mixed with the road salts to leave a gritty film on just about everything it touched, including Jim's favorite hat. It'd also caused a wreck on main street that blocked off traffic. And since Callahan was out sick and Powell was working on the paperwork he'd refused to file for the last six months, it'd been Hopper left to direct traffic. In the sludge. For four hours.

It was already dark by the time he'd had the time to signal. He drove back that night, exhausted, feeling like shit. He gave his special knock and Jane let him in, but she was already in her room, all the lights off.

He ran into the tree immediately and it wobbled precariously. "Shit," he grabbed it before it could fall. Something hit the ground at his feet, and after he righted the greenery, he stooped to pick it up. It was a bow, made of... plaid? He recognized the pattern. Didn't Jane have a shirt that looked sort of like... He turned on a light, and raised his eyebrows at the tree suddenly illuminated before him.

She'd cut up one of her own shirts to make bows for it. It was a blue plaid. Not the most festive, but he wasn't sure she understood the whole red and green thing. There were bits and baubles here and there, old stuff she must've found around the house. An old wood bird with a string tied around it, a lace doily, and... were those some of his old dog tags? There was a popcorn string, though he had no idea where on earth she'd gotten popcorn from. It was pretty weird popcorn, too. In fact, it didn't even look like popcorn. It looked like little bits of...

Eggs. There was an empty box on the table behind the tree, crumbs and spare thread scattered beside it. He looked again at the tree. She'd sacrificed her own stash of Eggs for her tree. He laughed and put the bow carefully back onto the tree, ate dinner, and went to bed.

The night of Christmas Eve, he'd bought her a box of *cinnamon* Eggs and wrapped the box up in a bow, and had left a note under the tree telling her to check the freezer. He smiled most of the day just wondering what she must've thought when she found them.

He got back a little after 5:15, arms laden with a hot box of pizza, a carton of egg nog, and a handful of hot chocolate mix he'd stolen from the station. It was already dark, but he could see the Christmas lights shining through the window.

She let him in and followed him closely as he carried his wares to the kitchen. He thought it was because she was hungry, but when finally had everything out of his hands, he could see that she was holding something out for him. A present. Wrapped in a towel and tied up in the same ribbon that he'd used on the box of Eggos.

"Merry Christmas," She offered. Touched, he took it and unwrapped it. A broken, slightly overcooked stack of waffles sat in his hands. "Cinnamon waffles," she explained. "I ate the eggos. I made more. For you."

"Thanks, kid," he smiled at her, and picked at the gift. As touched as he was, something in the pit of his stomach clenched nervously; he'd taught her how to *cook* waffles. He'd never shown her how to mix the batter. He broke off a corner and put it in his mouth.

Cinnamon. Oh, god, there was so much damn cinnamon. Shit, it hurt. His eyes began to water, but she was watching him, so he swallowed and forced a smile. "It's good," He coughed, trying desperately to fight the gag reflex against the cinnamon caked on the back of his throat. He reached for the carton of eggnog and, with great restraint, took the time to pour a glass before dousing his throat. "Why don't," he coughed, "why don't I save that as a treat for after dinner, yeah?"

She smiled at him, and for a moment, he almost forgot about the cinnamon. He drank some more eggnog anyway.

They ate pizza and drank their Christmas-y drinks and he even ate an *entire waffle* in front of her, despite the fire breaking out in his esophagus. He'd probably regret it later. He chased it with another mug of cocoa, and she finished off the eggnog and the pizza. She fell asleep slumped against him on the couch, *Miracle on 34th Street* dousing them both in quiet light. He watched her dozing, and pulled a blanket off the back of the couch to drape over her shoulders.

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep, too, until he woke up the next

morning with the worst crick in his neck that he'd had in years and someone knocking on his door.

He froze.

Someone was at their door.

Jane was up too, looking confused and hugging her blanket. She looked at him. He looked at her. He twisted his head around to look at the door, but it was impossible to see anything through the drawn curtains. The lights were still on, reflecting dully against the shades.

Oh god. It was the lights. Someone had seen the Christmas lights. They'd found them. Someone had followed him. They'd followed him and seen the lights and they *knew*.

"Go to your room," Hopper said, as evenly as he could. "Like we practiced. Quietly."

Eyes wide, Jane stood and snuck into her room and shut the door behind her. He waited until he heard the emergency lock on her door click into place. He'd regretted installing that lock ever since last summer when she'd begun abusing it during her sulking episodes, and had even considered taking it out, but now he was grateful. He took his gun from its holster and held it behind his back, flicking the safety off as he approached the door.

Chain lock still in place, he cracked the door open.

"Merry Christmas!" a crowd shouted at him.

"Jesus Christ-" he jumped, and finally realized who it was. Joyce and Will... as well as Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max. Hopper made his sigh of relief sound like one of frustration. "I have a damn gun in my hand," he complained, and slammed the door so he could undo the lock. He clicked the safety back on but holstered the gun in his belt. He opened the door again.

"I'm sorry, Hop," Joyce said, looking guilty. "I forgot."

"We came to wish El a Merry Christmas," Mike cut in, utterly unapologetic.

Hopper rubbed his neck where the crick was most pronounced. "Christmas was yesterday, kid."

"Well we couldn't sneak out here *yesterday*," Lucas said, "duh." Hopper didn't appreciate the *duh*.

"Yeah, that would've been *way* too suspicious," Dustin concurred.

They didn't seem to understand that everything was suspicious, out here. Then again, they were kids. "But today isn't?"

"Their parents all think they're at my house playing Rescue on Fractulus!" Will explained. Hopper's eyes shifted to Joyce.

"*Video game*," she mouthed. He nodded slowly.

"Oh."

"And we got this for Eleven!" Dustin hoisted a present from his backpack - a real present, wrapped and bowed and everything. Far more pristine than the eggos he'd left in the freezer.

"Right." He looked behind them to make sure there was no one else hiding in the trees. "Well, at least come inside before someone sees you." He ushered them all inside and shut the door, snapping all the locks in place behind them.

"Good to see you, too, Hop," Joyce teased his paranoia.

"El?" Mike was already calling. Hopper almost rolled his eyes.

"Calm down, kid," He brushed past him and tapped on the doorframe. "Jane, you got some visito-"

She opened the door before he could finish. "Mike?" She asked, eyes wide with hope.

"El!"

Mike rushed to her first and the gang followed, squeezing Hopper aside so they could mob her, hugging her and telling her how much they'd missed her and wishing her a Merry Christmas. He found

himself shunted off to the side with Joyce.

He sighed and crossed his arms, trying to look as annoyed as he should be. But Jane was absolutely beaming, so it was hard to save face. Joyce looked up at him and laughed.

"For you, milady," Dustin produced the present and held it out to Jane as some grand gesture.

"Open it, open it!" Lucas chanted excitedly. Jane looked at the wrapped thing with interest, but unfamiliarity.

"What is it?"

"It's a Christmas present," Mike explained, "something you give to your friends on Christmas."

Jane had only one such experience so far. "Like eggos?" She asked.

"Well, it's not Eggos," Mike smiled, "but you'll like it. I promise."

"It's from all of us," Will smiled, "Max too. Open it!"

Jane looked briefly to Hopper, who forced a grin and gave her a nod. She smiled back and tore in, shreds of wrapping paper falling to the ground. The kids cheered, and Jane had to turn the box around a few times to see what it was.

"Realistic walkie..." she paused, "walkie... talkie?"

"Yeah! Like the ones we have," Mike told her. "You remember. We all have one - Max got one yesterday. So we can all talk to each other."

"Open it! Open it!" Dustin kept encouraging. They helped her tear open the packaging and put in the batteries.

"A walkie-talkie?" Hopper turned to Joyce, talking low so the kids wouldn't hear. "You got her a... Joyce, those things are expensive."

"Don't look at me," the mother shrugged, gesturing to the kids. "They all pitched in. Been saving up their allowances and arcade money for weeks. Mike chipped in the most."

"Of course he did," Hopper scoffed. Joyce shook her head.

"He likes her, Hop."

"Oh, I know." Jim assured her, crossing his arms. "He's all she talks about."

They watched as the kids settled to the ground amid the Christmas carnage and all pulled out their own walkie-talkies and began messing around with the channels, practicing their overs and outs, the various codes indigenous to their party. They had code names and abbreviations for everything, a whole language all their own. And El - *Jane* was included. Hopper felt guiltier than ever keeping her cooped up here.

Hopper went out to the porch for a smoke and Joyce followed him.

"It's a risk, you know. Having a CB radio." He took a long puff and blew out a cloud, trying to ignore how the kids' chatter was audible even out here.

Joyce took out her own pack and lit up a cigarette. "You have one already, in case you hadn't noticed."

"We only use it for Morse."

"As if someone couldn't decode that?" Joyce shook her head. "You can't keep living like this, Hop. She can't either. So let her have her walkie-talkie. And get yourself a damn phone."

He didn't say anything for a few minutes. He smoked some more and tried not to shiver in the cold air.

"You helped with the walkie-talkie, Joyce." He said.

"Yes, I did," She confessed, and took a drag.

"Thought so."

They smoked in silence. At length, he jabbed the used butt into the ashtray. "Should've been me," he said. "I should've planned better. Saved a bit. Course she would've wanted a radio."

"Hop,"

"They use them constantly. I should've thought of it. Where do they sell 'em? Radio Shack?"

"Hop,"

"Who am I kidding, I don't have the money, anyway."

"Hop," Joyce snapped at him. She flicked her cigarette away. "It's a gift. We all wanted her to have it."

He sighed. Humility was a new feeling for him. "Thanks, Joyce."

"Hey mom," Will peeked through the door,

"What is it, baby?" Joyce turned.

"Where'd you put the eggnog?"

Hopper frowned at her. "You brought eggnog?" Jane had nearly made herself sick on the stuff last night.

"*Eggnog!*" shouted Dustin through the door.

"Let me get it," Joyce ignored him and went inside. Hopper was left alone on the porch, shaking his head.

He leaned on the rail and looked out over the slope of the forest. The snow obscured whatever greenery was left on the ground, and the trees themselves were bare, so he could see almost to the road. He only hoped that the road could not see to him. Or the smoke rising from the chimney. Or the lights in the windows. Or the excited, youthful voices echoing through the walls. His blazer was just visible from the house. Something moved by it, and his hand went immediately for his gun. It moved out in front of the truck; a rabbit.

The door slammed and he jumped again. "Okay," Joyce rejoined him, carrying two mugs of eggnog. "Here we go."

He couldn't help but smile as she pulled a flask from her coat and thoroughly spiked both drinks. She gave him one and raised the other

with a smile. "Merry Christmas, Hopper."

He smiled at her and forced himself to look away from the road. He clinked his mug against hers. "Merry Christmas, Byers."